

Dear Sir/Madam:

I am writing to express my deep concern regarding the shocking gender inequity represented in the Passport to Reading's Super Hero Squad Books. In fact, although my daughter loves reading these super hero adventures, I hate reading them to her. For example, in "Meet the Super Hero Squad," there are 18 super heroes as well as their commander, General Ross. Of those 19 characters, only one is female, Invisible Woman. To compound the problem, Invisible Woman is the only character shown inside and --worse and worse! -- she is shown playing with salt and sugar in a kitchen versus flying through the city or fighting crime. Invisible Woman's sole female character represents a mere 5% of the book's that, as we know, does not reflect the 50/50 distribution of gender in the world. As a second example, "The Trouble with Thor" features the heroes Thor, Silver Surfer, Dr. Strange, Hulk, Wolverine, Falcon, and Iceman, as well as General Ross; and the villains Loki, Doctor Octopus, and Magneto. That's eight male heroes, three male villains, and zero female characters.

I have noticed this gender inequity in other Super Hero Squad books that we have checked out of our public library previously—either through the disproportionate number of male characters versus females or, if there are female characters in the book, their lack of representation on the cover. Although my daughter remains a big fan of super hero stories, I feel that every time she reads one of these books, she is learning to not be strong or heroic herself, because of the glaring omission of female characters. Additionally, while the lack of female characters teaches her that her gender does not grow up to be heroes or strong, it is also terribly concerning to imagine that all the boys who reads these books learn a similarly sinister message: that only they will be strong, and that the arena of adventure and fighting is no place for girls. It is particularly disturbing that this gender disparity is found in a series that claims to be a "beginning readers' ticket to a brand-new world" i.e., these are books pitched for independent reading, meaning that there is even less adult intervention in the comprehension of these stories which may have otherwise allowed for the observation and discussion of the paucity of female characters.

As with all issues involving children it comes down to the crucial question, "How does this impact the playground?" How terribly easy is it to imagine my Helen, being drawn to her classmate Cody and Jake's play, if all three of them are informed by your Super Hero Squad stories:

Cody: Let's play superheroes!

Helen: Yeah! I love super heroes!

Jake: You can't play super heroes, you're a girl! Girls aren't superheroes!

Helen: What about Invisible Woman?

Cody: Oh, okay, you can make cookies in the kitchen.

In short, shame on you, in this day and age, for publishing a whole series of books that, while allegedly seeking to build independent reading skills and feature heroic wins of good over evil, in fact do such a profound disservice to the girls and boys who would read and learn from them.

I will also be circulating this concern to our local public library, school system, and book stores.